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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the research literature on character education and advocates its inclusion in the public school curriculum. Research indicates a connection between a lack of moral and ethical development and destructive behavior among children. Sections of the paper include: (1) Introduction; (2) "The American Moral Heritage"; (3) "Morality vs. Ethics"; (4) "Evidence To Support Character Education"; (5) "Theories of Character Education"; (6) Analysis; and (7) Conclusion. (EH)

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Character Education Should be Part of the Public Education System

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Abstract

Should character education be part of the public educational system's curriculum? Should the public schools take an active role in the process to properly prepare our children for the many moral dilemmas that they encounter in their lives? There is mounting evidence that indicates our children and youth are not aware of a proper set of values that can enhance their lives and our American society. Research indicates a connection between a lack of moral and ethical development and destructive behavior among children. Data supports the idea that morality and ethics should be taught in the public schools. A community-wide systemic effort is needed to help students gain insight into moral values, to approve these values, and to take action based on them. Effective character education is not only intellectual in nature, but must include the crucial emotional side which serves as the connection between judgment and behavior. Today, because of the social changes in our society, our schools have the added responsibility to nurture the moral reasoning and ethical behavior of the students.

Key Words: morality, ethics, character, social responsibility

Introduction

The ethical issue of social responsibility in our youth has become a renewed concern of educators. Today, it is vital that our educational process properly prepare our children for the many moral dilemmas that they encounter in their lives. There is strong evidence that indicates many of our youth are not aware of a proper set of values that can enhance their lives and our American society. This evidence is based on the assumption that our society has become less humane, more violent, and more pleasure seeking in nature (Calabrese, 1990). Bernan (1990) proposed that since there is an increased decline in the morals and values of our children, educators must initiate a change. He stressed that teachers must give our youth the experience of community, encourage them to develop basic social skills, strengthen their problem solving and organization skills, and help them to understand our global interdependence.

Our educational system needs to take an active role in helping our students develop a sense of purpose, feel that they belong to the community, and to believe in themselves enough to be able to resist negative pressures. Our youth need to take conscious control of their lives and understand the ethical choices that are part of their daily activities (Honig, 1990). Today's educators need to re-emphasize morality and transmit the importance of ethical behavior if our children are to lead proper and productive lives.

The American Moral Heritage

Some people question if there is an American moral heritage. We have more than 200 years of a nation that is the envy of the world with a democracy that has become a model for other nations. Our heritage is one that reflects a commitment to the sanctity of

the individual and to the nation. It is obvious that our system works. The American heritage is our common values, and there is a need to transmit these values to future generations if we are to preserve our productive way of life (Cavazos, 1990). Children do not automatically reflect ethical behavior based on moral reasoning. It takes much effort on the part of adults to help children attain their full humanity. Regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status people can hold the attributes of honesty, justice, virtue, equality, courage, and tolerance in common. As Cavazos (1990) has implied, "I have yet to meet one single individual who claims that lying, cheating, cowardice, or promiscuity are things to be valued or ideas to be nurtured in our children so they can succeed in life" (p. 1).

In the past, the family and religion were the main sources for moral education, but today the schools need to participate too. The schools must strengthen the morality and values the students receive at home and build a sense of belonging and responsibility to the community. In some cases, the schools must provide a value system to those children who have not been receiving one because of a dysfunctional home life.

It is vital that educators communicate more effectively with parents about why a moral life is important and educate children to recognize when they are being confronted with an ethical choice. Adults have the responsibility to help children understand and control negative impulses and to enhance their moral sense of good habits. People in our society cherish individual freedom, but our children also must understand ethical codes are necessary if that freedom is to continue. Honig (1990) expressed, "Quite simply, when we are civil - when we show respect, consideration, friendship, or concern for each other - society becomes a more gracious and enjoyable place to live for all of us" (p. 7).

Morality vs. Ethics

To achieve specific outcomes of character education, it is necessary to restate the concept of morality and re-emphasize the importance of ethical behavior. Concrete examples of ethical conduct have to be developed and related to everyday life. Wynne (1990) revealed that there is a difference between morality and ethics. The two concepts do not signify the same thing in the area of values but have a fine distinction. Morality can be described as a set of principles or standards designed to serve as guidelines. It is a code which assumes an absolute tone of guidance over life. Morality regulates what people should and should not do in our society. It is the foundation of ethics. Wynne (1990) suggests that children are capable of learning the practice of a moral code and right from wrong, like with the Ten Commandments; however, they may have difficulty in learning ethics or how to behave accordingly.

Ethics is a specific area in the philosophy of morality. It implies a refined code or the effort to apply moral rule in complex and subtle situations. Ethics applies to a code of conduct requiring people to weigh issues, apply prudence, and display considerable self-control. Effective learning of ethics can only take place when there has been a solid foundation in morality (Wynne, 1990). A clear understanding of morality and ethics needs to be established prior to the implementation of a character education program. What we have been teaching in schools is morality. Most children know and can distinguish between right and wrong. What we need to emphasize in schools is the teaching of ethics or the effort to apply the moral rule.

Evidence to Support Character Education

There is much recent evidence to support the idea that morality and ethics should be taught in the public schools. A 1990 Gallup Poll reported that 84 percent of parents favor the teaching of ethics in the schools. Another 68 percent of those surveyed indicated that educators should be provided with clear standards of what is moral and immoral and transmit it to their students. Cavazos (1990) indicated that today, the public schools of our nation have the support and should assume the role of teaching ethics to our children. Fine (1995) supports this claim adding that moral education programs can help our students to acquire ethical habits and social responsibility by assisting them to critically reflect on beliefs and perspectives.

Recently, we are witnessing the beginnings of a new character education movement which aims to restore "good character" as a desirable outcome of the school's along with knowledge. The Josephson Institute of Ethics (1992) brought together over 30 national educational leaders to draft eight principles of character education. Also, The Character Educational Partnership (1993) was developed as a national coalition committed to put character development at the top of the nation's educational agenda. Members of this group represent business, labor, government, youth, parents, religious communities, and the media. In addition, many publications are now available that support the case for character education and describe effective programs around the country.

Lickona (1993a) indicates that there are three main reasons for this rising interest in character education. The family, which was traditionally a child's primary moral teacher, is for vast numbers of children failing to perform that particular role, thus creating

a moral vacuum. Schools have to teach the values that children are not learning at home. The second impetus for renewed character education is the belief that many children are being adversely affected by poor parenting, the wrong kind of adult role models, negative pressures from peers, and the sex, violence, and materialism portrayed in the mass media. Evidence that a hostile moral environment is taking a toll on youth character can be seen in the following ten troubling trends (Lickona, 1993a):

- Increased dishonesty
- Rising youth violence
- Growing disrespect for authority
- Peer cruelty
- A resurgence of bigotry on school campuses
- A decline in work ethic
- Sexuality promiscuity
- A growing self-centeredness and declining civic responsibility
- An increase in self-destructive behavior
- Ethical illiteracy

The third reason for the rising interest in morality is for the recovery of shared, objectively important ethical behaviors. We are developing the understanding that we do share a basic morality in our society that is essential for our survival. This morality must be promoted to our young by directly teaching them such values as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and civic virtue. Lickona (1993b) noted that, "these values are not merely subjective preferences but that they have objective worth and a claim on our collective conscience" (p. 9). He adds that such values affirm dignity, promote the

common good, and protects our human rights. Also, they define our responsibilities in a democracy and are recognized by all civilized groups. Not to transfer these core ethical values to our children is a grave moral failure (Lickona, 1993b).

Lockwood (1993) perceives the need for schools to focus on producing ethical behavior in children. He documented that in recent years there has been a disturbing rise in poor behavior among our youth. Lickona (1991) supports this acknowledgement and warns that of all the moral problems in our society none has been more disturbing than the rise in youth violence. He indicates that inadequate understanding of commitment and the appreciation of moral values is the springboard of bad behavior. Wynne and Walberg (1985/86) also believed in this disclosure and calls for the deliberate transmission of moral values to children through the school system. Their assumption is that our failure to teach values is largely responsible for the rise in destructive behavior among children. Kilpatrick (1992) sees a connection between a lack of moral and ethical development and disastrous behavior. He indicates, "in addition to the fact that Johnny can't read, we are now faced with the more serious problem that he can't tell right from wrong" (p. 14).

Staugham (1982) has noted that modern society has become undisciplined, permissive, disrespectful, violent, and lawless; and the trend is most noticable among the youth. He implied that schools are not doing enough to instill moral values in the children and to ensure that their conduct is ethical and socially acceptable. The task of school based character education is to help students gain insight into moral values, to approve these values, and to take action based on them. A community-wide systematic effort is needed to enhance morality in our young people. Fine (1995) indicates that schools are not taking advantage of their opportunity to impart morality to the students. She believes

that American public schools should help young people sort through the many challenges they face and calls on the schools to enhance their commitment to prepare the students for the different communities and perspectives that make up the American democracy. In addition, she points out that comprehensive character education encourages students to think for themselves, test their assumptions, question others, and remain in dialogue. This is the type of learning needed to develop children capable of autonomous and critical moral reasoning.

Theories of Character Education

The operant conditioning theory suggests that behavior which occurs in response to external stimuli is shaped by consequences of a person's actions. It is believed that appropriate student actions that are praised or rewarded will be repeated and inappropriate behaviors that are not reinforced will not be repeated. This approach usually helps to suppress inappropriate student behavior only if the teacher is present, if the student is motivated by the reinforcement, or if the student views the consequences as unpleasant. However, operant conditioning is effective as a short-term method but does not achieve the long-term goals of having students control their own behavior. Since children can think and act upon their environment and not just react to it, this theory does not provide a complete account for the reason children behave as they do. Students benefit most when an environment is created to nurture learning by providing information and allowing them to effectively problem solve (Kovar, Ermler, & Mehrhof 1992). By providing vital information on ethical behavior, the students would be able to understand what kind of behavior is appropriate under specific conditions and why this behavior is appropriate. Under these conditions, the students would grow to become self-disciplined making their

own behavioral choices and assessing the appropriateness of certain actions. Gordon (1974) and Lickona (1993a) warn that to effectively bring about ethical behavior in today's children requires more internal controls, not more external controls.

The classic view of morality suggests that before acting, a person should consider the arguments for and against the alternatives and disregarding opinion should be guided by reason. Velasquez and Rostanskowski (1985) indicated that moral questions must be settled by rational methods when determining what to do. Rachels (1980) reinforces the idea that moral decisions depend on and must be based on reason, adding that such reason can be examined and criticized for its accuracy and logical consistency. Ethics tries to solve moral questions by appealing to rational consideration and not to emotions or to the norms of a group (Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985).

In the face of a deteriorating social fabric, character education must first have an adequate theory of what good character is so that schools have a clear idea of their goals. The concept of character must be broadly conceived to encompass the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of morality (Lickona, 1993b). The schools need to help the students to understand the core values of good character, adopt or commit to them, and then act upon them in their daily lives.

The cognitive aspect of character focus on six specific moral qualities (Lickona 1993b):

- Awareness of the moral dimensions of the situation at hand
- Knowing moral values and what they require in concrete terms
- Perspective taking
- Moral reasoning

. Thoughtful decision-making

. Moral self-knowledge

These six powers of rational thought are required for an individual to reach full moral maturity. However, people can be intelligent about matters of right and wrong and still behave unethical. Character education that is merely intellectual in nature misses the crucial emotional side which serves as the bridge between judgment and behavior (Lickona, 1993b). The emotional side to character includes the conscience, self-respect, empathy, self-control, and a willingness to recognize and correct moral failures. The behavioral aspect of morality focuses on the three additional qualities of competence in listening, communicating, and cooperating; the will to mobilize judgment and energy; and the habit to respond to situations in a proper way. Lickona (1993b) pointed out that many individuals know the proper thing to do in a situation and feel strongly about it, yet still fail to translate moral judgment and feelings into effective ethical behavior. Moral action draws upon the ability to convey moral knowledge and thought into behavior.

Analysis

A review of the literature indicated that others have been concerned with the issue of character education as part of the public educational process (Brooks & Kann, 1993; Cavazo, 1990; Honig, 1990; Kilpatrick, 1992; Lickona, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Lockwood, 1993; Staugham, 1982; and Wynne & Walberg, 1985/86).

Fine (1995) suggested that public interest in character education has increased due to a decline in the social fabric of our society. She pointed out that the decrease in morality and ethics has been seen in the increase in teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, and

acts of murder, violent assault, and vandalism committed mainly by young people as well as the growing number of hate crimes and other acts of prejudice among our youth.

The majority of the literature agreed that practical application of moral developmental theories, today, should also be accomplished in the school. Corroborate findings coming out of programs such as Heartwood (Buttram, Kruse, & Sidler, 1992), The Child Development Program (Murphy, 1988), and the Baltimore County Program (Katish, 1992) concluded that the effects of character education programs can and are being measured. The results of such studies are providing reason to believe that schools can effect positive character development on all grade levels. Research by Fine (1995) confirmed similar findings and stressed that "schools can, should, and must be an arena in which future citizens are prepared to deal with contentious issues and learn to make the kinds of moral choices adults are constantly called on to make" (p. 191). Haynes (1997) further contended that schools have the crucial task of teaching and inspiring character development with the ultimate mission of transmitting from one generation to the next the habits of the mind and heart necessary for good moral reasoning and ethical behavior. However, Velasquez and Rostankowski (1985) expressed that, "No textbook, nor the best instruction in the world, can teach a student to be ethical, but a teacher can aspire to remove some of the confusion that confronts today's student" (p. xi).

In 1985, the Chicago Foundation for Education was formed to focus on character education of public school students. It provides a character education curriculum and funds to school districts who agree to a school-wide character program. Implemented in more than 60,000 classrooms in the United States, this curriculum's evaluation prepared by the Character Education Partnership, Inc. (1996) reported that students fight less,

engage in less vulgarity, are less likely to steal, are more likely to consider the consequences of their actions, and cooperate better with each other. Docheff (1997) reports that close to 75 percent of the educators associated with this character curriculum report that education in this area is very effective and they clearly support the goals and objectives of teaching character education in public schools.

Streshly and Schaps (1988) gathered data indicating that a character education program that is broadly conceived and carefully carried out can have positive effects on students' attitudes, social skills, and behavior. Their data indicated that students in character education programs are significantly more cooperative, supportive, and helpful than children in comparison schools, though they are not less competitive or assertive. In addition, they specified that charactered programmed students are more sophisticated in understanding and resolving situations, are less likely to propose impulsive aggression, plan more steps in achieving a resolution, and come up with more alternative plans. Solomon (1997) declared that evidence to date supports the contention that carefully designed instructional strategies provide a powerful influence on character development. However, methods for developing sound instructional strategies have not yet been carefully specified. The existing research supports that character development that is fostered by clear, fairly enforced rules, and by orderly environments is effective. This conclusion suggests that discipline is an essential element of moral education (Leming, 1993).

It is possible that with the required collective support of the parents, school personnel, and the community, and structured on research, a school-based character education program would be effective for today's school systems. Schools could develop

a comprehensive character education program based on the development of moral reasoning to achieve district objectives of ethical behavior and social responsibility. The district's physical education program could be instrumental in this process by implementing cooperative education and team learning efforts. In addition, the districts' athletic program which consists of many team sports, could develop and implement a sportsmanship learning model to enhance proper conduct during practice and interscholastic athletic events.

Conclusion

Today, young people come to school from a variety of backgrounds that affect their interactions. They face a society that no longer serves as a protector but often encourages abuse and exploitation. Ryan (1996) stressed that the values and character of our children and youth are complicated by a number of forces like the fragmentation of the family, decline in trust in public institutions, increasing public concern about questionable ethical practices in business, industry, and government, and the impact of the mass media. The public school is more than an institution concerned with the transmission of cognitive knowledge. It is also a social institution whose value structure is concerned with developing children who will support and strengthen dominant civic and moral values (Sinclair & Finn, 1989). Moral values in a democratic society are best taught when schools, parents, and the community cooperate. However, because of the social changes in our society this duty is becoming a growing responsibility of the schools. Schorr (1997) indicates that character education is not a course or a subject, but a process. He adds that conscienceness needs to be developed in children by equipping them to think, discern, ask questions, and evaluate answers. He also declared that the development of character in

children requires the ability to take abstract concepts like compassion, forgiveness, integrity, respect, responsibility, cooperation, and perseverance and cast them into concrete experiences or behaviors. This process will enable a child to understand the emotions that results from living a life driven by positive and moral character.

Parents, child workers, and educators need to model, pose challenges, and help children understand and reason the effects of their actions on other people. Today, our schools have the added responsibility to nurture the moral reasoning and ethical behavior of the students. This process needs to take place at a young age to properly prepare our children to live and work in a democratic society that is complex and culturally diverse.

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